DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 571 CS 510 549

AUTHOR George, Marshall A.
TITLE Teachers Learning Together: Faculty Book Clubs as Professional Development in an Urban Middle School.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; Educational Research; Ethnography; Instructional Effectiveness; *Middle School Teachers; Middle Schools; *Professional Development; *Teacher Role; Teacher Surveys; Urban Education
IDENTIFIERS *Book Clubs; *Literature Circles; New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

Although much has been written about the effectiveness of book clubs (also known as literature circles) as one approach to reading and discussing literature in the classroom, M.A. George (1998) found that adolescent literature as a genre and book clubs as an instructional approach were being underutilized in a group of New York City middle schools. The discovery that teachers at one middle school were not integrating much adolescent literature into their literature programs led one researcher to build on this framework and to initiate and evaluate a staff development program in which urban middle school teachers participated in faculty book clubs as a means of reading and discussing adolescent literature. The study explored whether this approach to professional development impacted the participants' teaching and curriculum planning and their students' reading habits. Twenty-three people involved in teaching voluntarily participated in the faculty book clubs at some point over a year and a half. During the first semester, the researcher was a participant observer; during the second year he was a literacy staff developer in the school. The clubs met 20 times for 30 minutes each time. Participants were surveyed about their perceptions. A qualitative/phenomenological/ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis was employed. Data analysis indicated that faculty book clubs are indeed an effective approach to literacy staff development. As a result of the experience, the core teachers who participated had the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs and practice, to actively engage in the learning process, and to incorporate different works of literature and instructional strategies into their classrooms. (Contains 21 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 452 571

Teachers Learning Together: Faculty Book Clubs as Professional Development in an Urban Middle School.

by Marshall A. George

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

M.A. George

CS 510 549

Teachers Learning Together:
Faculty Book Clubs as Professional Development in an Urban Middle School

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association
Seattle, WA, April 2001

Marshall A. George, Ed.D.
Fordham University, New York City
mageorge@fordham.edu

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The 1998 Reading Report Card produced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that approximately 40% of adolescents have difficulty reading and comprehending text. It has also been suggested that there is also a huge problem with "aliteracy" among adolescent readers who can read and comprehend text, but refuse to do so (Blinz 1993; Vacca 1998). Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) suggest that adolescent aliteracy may be due to the teacher selection and assignment of literature that students are uninterested in or feel that they have little or no personal connection with.

Lois Stover (1996) suggests that adolescent literature should be the heart of the middle school curriculum. Indeed, a number of scholars in the fields of English and Literacy Education have argued that literature written *about* adolescents and *for* adolescents is crucial in motivating resistant readers *to read* and in providing students with reading difficulties literature they *want to learn to read* (Hipple, 1992; Kaywell, 1993; George, 1998). Yet, Applebee (1993) and Bushman (1996) have found that adolescent literature is often not being thoroughly integrated into middle and secondary school literature programs.

There has been a great deal written about the effectiveness of book clubs (also known as literature circles) as one approach to reading and discussing literature in the classroom (Daniels, 1994; Harste, Short, and Burke, 1986; McMahon & Rapheal, 1997). This model allows students more "voice and choice" (Daniels 1994), and provides opportunities for students to participate in meaningful, authentic, and personal conversations about the literature they have read. Nevertheless, George (1998) found that adolescent literature as a genre and book clubs as an instructional approach were being underutilized in a group of middle schools in New York City.

Murphy and Lick (1998) have advocated whole-faculty study groups as an effective vehicle for bringing about philosophical, instructional, and curricular change in schools. Flood and Lapp (1994) describe a faculty book club they participated in at an elementary school in California, and report great success with these literature discussion groups. When speaking of professional development, Lieberman (1995) points out that, "Teachers must have opportunities to discuss, think about, try out, and hone new practices" (p. 592). Sparks and Hirsch (1997) declare that, "Staff development's success will be judged not by how many teachers and administrators participate in staff development programs or how they perceive its value, but by whether it alters instructional behaviors in a way that benefits students" (p. 5).

Context and Overview

Having discovered that teachers in one middle school were not integrating much adolescent literature into their literature programs, and building on this framework, this researcher attempted to initiate and evaluate a professional development program in which urban middle school teachers participated in faculty book clubs as a means of reading and discussing adolescent literature. The overall purpose of the study, then, was to determine if this faculty book club

approach to professional development impacted the participants' teaching and curriculum planning and their students' reading habits.

Situated in an urban school district in New York City, "Roberts Middle School" serves approximately 1400 students in grades 6-8. The student population is 38 % White, 13% Black, 19% Hispanic, and 29% Asian or Pacific Islanders. The administration reports that there is more of a problem with aliteracy then illiteracy among the school's students. There are approximately 75 full time faculty members in the school, with 22 of them serving in the language arts and social studies departments. All faculty members were invited and encouraged to attend the monthly lunch-period book club meetings. Each month, participants were asked to read the selected book (all chosen from the growing body of literature written especially for adolescents) before each meeting. Faculty book clubs met during the spring and fall semesters of 1999, and the spring semester of 2000.

A total of 23 different people, including twelve teachers from four different departments, a school psychologist, two assistant principals, a coordinator of special education, three student teachers, two staff developers, a librarian, and an administrative intern voluntarily participated in the faculty book clubs at some point over a year and a half. During the first semester, the researcher was a participant-observer, and during the second year he was in the position of literacy staff developer in the school. At one point, students were invited to join the lunch time discussions and six of them did so at various times. Many of the faculty members participated sporadically, however, a core of six teachers (five from language arts/humanities and one from social studies department), two assistant principals, and a staff developer (the researcher) formed the core of the faculty book club group.

This core group of teachers consisted of two sixth grade humanities teachers in their fifth year of teaching (Amy, Millicent), one social studies teacher in her sixth year of teaching (Diane), a sixth grade language arts teacher (Geanine) and a seventh grade language arts teacher (Eileen), both in their third year of teaching, and a first year sixth grade language arts teacher (Sally). The core members were not selected; rather, they were the teachers who consistently participated on a voluntary basis in the book club program throughout the year and a half of the research study, and who consented to being participants in the research aspect of the project.

During the course of one-and-one-half years, the book clubs met twenty times. The meetings lasted for approximately thirty minutes. In addition to discussing individual responses to the books, participants critiqued author's writing styles, discussed important universal themes, made connections between the texts and their own personal experiences, to other texts, and to current events. Often, participants shared reactions to portrayals of gender, race, and religion in the various books read. In general, book club members responded to the books as *readers*, rather than as *educators*. Each week, however, they did assume their role as educators and discussed issues and practices related to the incorporation of the literature into their curriculum.

Research Questions and Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The purpose of this research study was to explore the use of faculty book clubs as a means of providing professional development that introduces urban middle school teachers to acclaimed contemporary adolescent literature and to the book club model of discussing literature in the classroom. In this study the implementation and the effectiveness of this approach to professional development were examined. Specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1. What are participants' perceptions of adolescent literature before and after participating in faculty book clubs?
2. What are participants' perceptions of book clubs before and after participating in faculty book clubs?
3. Do participants in faculty book clubs integrate the literature read there into their curriculum?
4. Do participants integrate student book clubs in their own classrooms after participating in faculty book clubs?
5. How are students impacted by the faculty book clubs?

In order to address the research questions, a qualitative/phenomenological/ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis (see Creswell 1998) was employed. Following is a brief description of the multiple sources of data gathered by the researcher and the approaches used to analyze those data in order to address the research questions:

1. Survey Questionnaires—Book club participants completed surveys before the faculty book clubs were organized. In addition to providing demographic information, these researcher-generated instruments used open-ended questions to ascertain the participants' experience with and attitudes towards adolescent literature and book clubs/literature circles. Responses to open-ended questions were recorded for each of the six core participants. A similar survey was completed by all six of the core group participants at the end of the first year of the faculty book club program in an effort to determine their attitudes towards adolescent literature and book clubs after having participated in the faculty book clubs. The responses from the second survey were compared with those of the first one using a charting procedure (Fetterman 1998). The following semester, each participant completed a checklist designed to determine the extent to which they reported having incorporated each of the works of adolescent literature reading during faculty book clubs into their literature programs after becoming participants in the faculty book club program. All of the survey data were then triangulated with interview and observational data.

2. Interviews with Faculty Participants—The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with each member of the core group of participants before and after the first semester of faculty book club meetings. The interview protocol used was designed to gain an understanding of the participants' past and current usage of literature in the language arts and social studies curriculums, as well as their beliefs about the inclusion of adolescent literature in middle school literature programs. In addition, participants were asked about their knowledge and use of book clubs in their language arts and social studies classes. Transcripts of the tape-recorded interviews were analyzed using the modified Stevic-Colaizzi-Keen method described by Creswell (1998). This involved a horizonalization of the data, or a listing of each significant statement from the interviews related to references to titles of literature, literary genre, instructional strategies, curriculum planning, and student response. Common themes were identified, and the researcher constructed a description of the essence of the faculty book club experience (Creswell 1998 p. 150).

3. Observations of Classrooms—The researcher observed each of the participants' during teaching periods before, during, and after the Faculty Book Club experience. Each participant was observed at least three times, using an observation guide to make field notes related to the literature used in class, instructional strategies used in literature discussions, and student participation in discussions of literature. Field notes were sorted and analyzed using ethnographic methodology to identify common themes, which were recorded in comparison tables (Spradley, 1980).

4. Interviews with Students—One or two students in five of the faculty book club participants' classes were interviewed about their experiences in classroom book clubs revolving around adolescent literature (nine student interviews). The interview protocol was intended to provide data to help the researcher examine the impact of faculty book clubs on students in the participants' classes. As the administration preferred that interviews with students not be tape recorded, field notes were taken during the ten-minute interviews by the researcher. A research assistant simultaneously took notes on the interviews in order to establish field note reliability. The notes were analyzed qualitatively and common words, phrases, and themes were identified and listed in two categories; comments related to adolescent literature and comments related to book clubs. The lists were then analyzed independently, using a charting system, by the researcher and two assistants to determine the nature of the responses.

Results

Careful analysis and triangulation of the large amount of qualitative data collected for this study reveals several things in relation to the research questions.

Faculty Perceptions and Integration of Adolescent Literature

Before Faculty Book Club Participation

Data from the surveys and initial individual interviews suggest that, before the book clubs began, only one of the core members of the faculty book club program had taken an adolescent literature course in her pre-service teacher education program. All six indicated in the initial interview that they had only very basic knowledge of the field of adolescent literature. However, they all agreed that as middle school teachers, they felt the need to be familiar with more literature from the genre, and were eager to become involved in the faculty book clubs. When asked how they viewed adolescent literature in relationship to the literature in the canon, three of the core members of the group suggested that they saw adolescent literature as "fun" or "good for pleasure reading," but considered it to be "unchallenging" or "inappropriate for whole class study." In contrast, one humanities teacher (Amy) considered adolescent literature to be the "cornerstone" of her humanities curriculum, reading as many as five books from the genre with her sixth graders the previous year. Four of the core members expressed concern about the "quality" of adolescent literature, suggesting that much of it might be considered "substandard."

With regards to integration of adolescent literature in the curriculum prior to participation in faculty book clubs, four of the teachers reported integrating only one or two works of adolescent literature into their sixth and seventh grade language arts literature programs the previous year, both as whole class studies. They did indicate, however, that most of the self-selected independent reading done by their students had been adolescent literature. Diane, the social studies teacher, had never integrated literature of any type into her social studies curriculum. As mentioned above, Amy had read five works of adolescent literature with her students the previous year.

After Faculty Book Club Participation

Analysis and triangulation of the data from the surveys, interviews, and observations after participation in the faculty book club project indicates a major shift in both the perceptions and practices of five of these six core members after participating in the faculty book clubs. Amy, who had indicated prior to the book clubs that she felt adolescent literature was the cornerstone of her curriculum, reported that "the introduction to so many new wonderful books only strengthened my belief that this is what I want my sixth graders reading. I have to figure out how to get even more in next year!" Each of the other five members used overwhelmingly positive language when talking about the genre of adolescent literature after having read only 10 of the books. None of the teachers had previously incorporated any of the book club books that we read

into their literature programs. Surveys, interviews, and observations of the all five of the humanities and language arts teachers revealed that every title read in faculty book clubs was used in at least one of the following components of their literature programs after the book club experience: independent reading, whole class studies, and book clubs. Diane reported that although she found it difficult to incorporate much literature into the social studies curriculum, she had integrated the adolescent novels she had read in book clubs into her classroom library, and often recommended them to the students for independent reading.

Faculty Perceptions and Integration of Book Clubs

Before Faculty Book Club Participation

Only two teachers, Amy and Millicent, indicated in the initial interview that had attempted book clubs in their classrooms prior to participation in the faculty book clubs. Amy reported having had great success with the approach, while Millicent indicated that it was "fun" but "maybe too much work without enough reward." The other four core members said they felt that they were "not sure how to set [book clubs] up," or "not comfortable with the concept" of book clubs, or "had never really thought about it." Two teachers felt the book club approach would "not be as effective as a whole class discussion" and that, "students would goof-off if I let them work together in small groups just to talk about books." Sally said that she "liked the idea of book clubs as a social activity," but was not sure that she could use them "to teach the important things, like the elements of fiction."

After Faculty Book Club Participation

At the end of the first of three semesters of faculty book clubs, three additional core members indicated a desire to incorporate book clubs as an instructional strategy into their curriculum. Subsequent observations in the classrooms of Geanine, Eileen, and Sally the following semester revealed that they had, indeed, all initiated book clubs as a means for discussing literature in their classrooms, often using literature they had read in the faculty book clubs. Sally requested additional support from her staff developer so that she could "make them run more smoothly so I can have book clubs two or three times a year." She, along with Eileen and Geanine, indicated that they felt book clubs were a "highly effective" way to get students to engage in "meaningful discussions" and were "amazed" at the level of participation that book clubs brought about from their students. During the two semesters after the faculty book club experience, the six core members incorporated book clubs into their own literature programs: Amy five times; Millicent three times, Sally and Eileen two times, and Geanine and Diane each once. Observations of Diane's class indicated that she was using the book club approach in her social studies class to discuss short nonfiction historical documents.

Student Response to Adolescent Literature and Book Clubs

Data collected during interviews with students showed that their response to the adolescent literature their teachers brought back from faculty book club was overwhelmingly positive. Two or three of the students interviewed suggested that the books were "the best I have ever read!" One seventh-grade student questioned, "why can't we read this stuff all year long?" Indeed, of the ten personal responses related during the interviews, eight were considered by the researcher to be positive comments, and two were "mixed" ("I liked parts of the book, but found it boring in some places.") Interview data supported observational data suggesting that more students were more actively involved in discussion during book clubs than were in whole class discussions. One student suggested, "I don't usually bother to say anything [during whole class discussions], but in my book group I talked as much as everyone else." Similar comments were made by four other students during interviews. Three students reported that there had been an increase in their independent reading, because "[I] want to read the things Ms [teacher] comes back and tells us about [after faculty book clubs]"

Conclusions

Sparks & Hirsh (1997) argue that traditional approaches used over the years in the professional development of teachers must be replaced with a more constructivist model. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) insist that, "Professional development today also means providing occasions for teachers to reflect critically on their practice and to fashion new knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learners" (p.597). The purpose of this research was to implement a faculty book club program as a professional development effort to encourage teachers in one middle school to incorporate more adolescent literature in their reading programs, and to widen their repertoires of instructional strategies to include book clubs (McMahon & Raphael 1997). It was hoped that by doing so, students in the participants' classes would be positively impacted.

The core participants in this study were volunteers who came into the faculty book club program because they recognized a gap in their content knowledge of adolescent literature. Before participating in faculty book clubs, most were including little adolescent literature in their literature programs. Several were skeptical about the quality of the literature from this genre, and felt it was most appropriate for "pleasure reading." Four of six had not attempted book clubs in their own classrooms, and the two who had reported mixed perceptions of their experiences.

Analysis of the data collected during the year and a half study indicates that faculty book clubs are indeed an effective approach to literacy staff development. As a result of the experience, the core teachers who participated had the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs and practice, to actively engage in the learning process, and to incorporate different works of literature and instructional strategies into their classrooms. Interviews at the end of the study indicate that the teachers were very pleased with this opportunity, and considered it to have been, in the words of Geanine, "the most worthwhile staff development [I had] this year." Indeed, this professional development experience brought about change in the beliefs and practices of these six teachers. In addition, classroom sets of several of the titles read during the faculty book clubs were purchased by the school and integrated into the collection of texts in the language arts and humanities book rooms. A number of teachers who did not participate in the faculty book clubs incorporated the new titles into their own literature programs, indicating a more far-reaching implication of the faculty book club experience.

Sparks and Hirsch (1997) argue that professional development may only be considered successful when it "alters instructional behaviors in ways that benefit students" (p.5). Indeed, data obtained from the interviews with students in the classes of the six core participates indicate that students became more enthusiastic about the books from faculty book clubs that they were reading in class than they were about previous works of literature they had studied. Likewise, the observational and interview data indicate that the students were more engaged and more involved in their literature classes when working in book clubs discussing adolescent literature.

These findings are important, as they provide teacher educators, staff developers, administrators, and teachers with a model for professional development that does, indeed, have an impact on curriculum, instruction, and most importantly, student attitudes toward reading. In a time when reading abilities and habits of adolescents are of great concern, a model of professional development that effectively enhances and supports teachers' efforts to address these concerns should be of great interest to educational leaders.

References

Applebee, A.N. (1993). Literature in the secondary school: Studies of curriculum and instruction in the United States. NCTE Research Report No. 25. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Blinz, W.P. (1993). Reluctant readers in secondary education: Some insights and implications. Journal of Reading, 36(8), 604-615.

Bushman, J.H. (1996). Young adult literature in the classroom—Or is it? English Journal 86(3) 35-40.

Creswell, J.W. (1998). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Daniels, H. (1994). Literature circles: Voice and choice in student-centered classrooms. York, ME: Stenhouse.

Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin M. (1995). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform." Phi Delta Kappan 76(8), 597-604.

Fetterman, D.M. (1998). Ethnography: Step by step. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Flood, J., & Lapp, D. (1994). Teacher book clubs: Establishing literature discussion groups for teachers. The Reading Teacher, 47, 574-76.

George, M.A. (1998). Young adult literature in the middle school literacy program: Why? How? What? Impact on Instructional Improvement, 27(1), 19-27.

Harste, J.C., & Short, K.G. (1988). Creating Classrooms for authors: The reading-writing connection. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hipple, T.W. (1992). The universality of the young adult novel in Monseau, V.R., & Salvner, G.M., eds. Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, pp. 3-16.

Kaywell, J.F. (1993). Adolescents at risk. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Lieberman, A. (1995). Practices that support teacher development. Phi Delta Kappan, 76, 591-596.

McMahon, S.I., & Raphael, T.E. (1997). The book club connection: Literacy learning and classroom talk. New York: Teachers College Press.

Murphy, C.U., & Lick, D.W. (1998). Whole-faculty study groups: A powerful way to change schools and enhance learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (1999). NAEP 1998 reading report card for the nation and the states [online]. Available Internet: http://www.ed.gov/NCES/NAEP.

Sparks, D., & Hirsh, S. (1997). A new vision for staff development. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Spradley, J.P. (1980). Participant observation. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Stover, L. T. (1996). Young adult literature: The heart of the middle school curriculum. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Vacca, R. (1998). Let's not marginalize adolescent literacy. Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 41, 604-609.

Worthy, J, Moorman, M. & Turner, M. (1999). What Johnny likes to read is hard to find in school. Reading Research Quarterly, 34, 12-27.